

***Speak*, Trigger Warnings, and Listening to Student Needs**

Andrea Marshbank

English language arts is a vulnerable subject. It involves self-expression, serious reflection, and deep discussion in a way that I did not understand when completing my pre-service teaching program. Entering this profession last year, I was pleasantly surprised by the complex subjects my students were eager to write about. Excited, I grabbed ahold of their engagement. We used it as fuel. My students have written essays, podcasts, and blogs on their home-life struggles, the unbelievable pressures of high school, and the microaggressive acts of racism teachers can not quite catch in the hallways. Together, my students and I learned that writing and talking about these issues creates positive change. I loved giving my students the chance to write about and discuss hard topics in my classroom. On the days when we cleared out the mumbo-jumbo of “normal” class expectations, when we simply talked and wrote about real world issues, it was those days that were special. They were meaningful. My kids asked for more days like them, and I tried to honor that request.

One of the ways I did that is by assigning literature that matters—literature that is courageous and bold, literature that takes nuanced topics and folds them into beautiful characters, literature with heart wrenching symbolism and page turning plot. I am confident I do all of those things when I teach my regular sections of English classes the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. We read it aloud last spring, going slowly, and seriously considering all aspects of this engaging novel.

When I gave my Honors ninth grade students the book on a whim—it previously was not in their curriculum—I felt I was doing a good deed. I had given them a relevant novel, with little expectations, other than for them to read it over that month. It was a spur of the moment assignment, in replacement of a different mini unit. No study guides or pop quizzes. None of the bulk that makes students get caught up in the *school* part of school readings.

I had good intentions. I wanted my students to be comfortable discussing the serious side of important issues like mental illness and sexual assault. I wanted them to look at Melinda Sordino’s experience, one of tragedy and strength, and see the meaning within it. Empathy is a key part of learning and *Speak* is an excellent learning tool. I was confident this group would take Anderson’s work and create something impressive. To their credit, they did. Just not in the way I expected.

The surprise came to me on the day of my most nerve wracking lesson. During this class period, students spent their time at four stations learning about the context of the issue that sits at the heart of Anderson’s *Speak*: rape. One station addressed the controversy of the young adult novel, asking if it should be taught in schools at all. Another station addressed the male perspective of sexual assault by demonstrating that this is an issue that affects everyone—not just women. The next station included articles on current events, like the #metoo movement and *Time*’s recognition of “The Silence Breakers” as their Person of the Year. Lastly, students learned about what rape culture is and how it influences the world around us. There is a great deal of nonfiction reading and evidence-based writing involved for each station, but, of course, that is not what made this lesson difficult.

The struggle with this lesson comes from my concern that my students will be upset, rude, horrified, or anything in between. I worry that they will look at this material as another teacher pushing their liberal agenda, and not as a discussion of real life. Most of all, I worry that I will not be able to handle their questions. If I cannot address the skepticism that unfairly surrounds the topic of rape, what will that say about me?

Regardless, I taught the lesson.

I walked around the various stations, conversing briefly with students, taking their temperature on the topic. How are things going? Does everything make sense? And, of course, the most important question to ask a budding mind: What do you think? A young woman, whom I respect and admire, responded:

“You should have given us a trigger warning before you had us read *Speak*.”

It was this well-spoken sentence said by a caring student that set me on my heels for days. This was strange. The moments that we take home with us long after the final bell seem to be loud or tear-filled. To my surprise, this moment was none of those. A simple truth had emerged from my classroom.

The young woman continued. “We really respect that you chose to teach this book, we get that it’s a big deal, but a trigger warning would have been nice. Some of us were really thrown off when you just tossed us a book and we did not know anything about it and then it turned out to be about rape.” Two other students were at the station and, when I looked to them, nodded in agreement.

I was immediately embarrassed. My face became warm and my voice high pitched. Outwardly, I expressed sympathy and understanding with comments like, “I really appreciate your input, I had not thought of that.” Inwardly, I felt shame. She was absolutely right. I had made a mistake.

I should have given more preface to this book. For that lesson alone, I had warned my students that we would cover a difficult topic. As a result, one student requested to opt out and was completing alternate work in a different classroom. Another student had inexplicably not shown up that day. I do not know why these students chose a different path on this day, and the explicit reason does not matter. It is none of my business. The experiences of my students are valid, no matter what they are, and I can never presume to know what is happening in their lives. I can only support them.

However, if I had that much response to simply letting them know a lesson would be sensitive, what could they have felt when I handed them a book without any trigger warning on these same issues?

Trigger warnings get a bad rap in the field of education. Some teachers fear that they are coddling our students when they allow them the freedom to choose whether or not to interact with the material. These teachers argue that trigger warnings do not exist in the real world; kids need to learn how to deal with difficult content. This argument is incorrect. As adults, we have the power to leave scenarios that cause us to feel uncomfortable. We can change jobs, exit the movie theater, or simply drive away from offensive situations. Students are not permitted do that in the classroom without serious repercussions. Offering students a trigger warning for sensitive content is a way to empower students to make the best decisions for themselves. That is a lesson that is worth its own weight.

It is incredibly important to teach novels like *Speak*, to talk freely about the problems of mental illness and rape, and to do it in a safe classroom environment. However, part of building a safe classroom environment is giving students opportunities to let their teachers know that they are triggered. While discomfort is the ultimate symptom of impactful learning, my students need to know that I will respect their needs during these difficult times of learning.

In the future, I will not nonchalantly hand my students *Speak* without a trigger warning. Rest assured, I will still hand it to them, but I will also give them the tools they need to be safe in my classroom. If at any point in time my students feel concerned while reading, I will invite them to skip that section of the novel. If they are upset during a classroom lesson, they will be permitted to go to the hallway. If they feel the need to mentally distance themselves from the conversations we engage

in by not speaking, I will respect that. It is critical that we remember to give our students appropriate ways to exit the space when they are triggered.

It has become more and more apparent to me that we need to listen closely to what our students are saying. I have heard multiple teachers rationalize that they no longer ask the opinions of their students because, “They don’t know what I know.” That exact statement shows the beauty of asking your students what they need in lessons. Students know different things than we do. They know themselves.

Author Biography

Andrea Marshbank is a second-year English language arts teacher and assistant debate and forensics coach at Seaman High School. She is also a Teacher Leader for the National Writing Project, a 2018 Kansas Horizon Award Nominee, and frequent guest blogger for Edutopia. Ms. Marshbank has spoken about her award-winning writing on EduTalk Radio, presented at the 2017 National Council of Teachers of English Convention on teaching students digital literacy to improve online research skills, and at the 2017 Mid-America Association for Computers in Education Conference on using film as literature in the English classroom. Check out her blog at www.themarshbankclassroom.com or contact her at andreamarshbank@gmail.com.